



April 2008

ICT briefing note

Regarding: E-Safety - Internet Safety and Gaming

Following: Publication of The Byron Report

Safer Children in a Digital World - The Report of the Byron Review

The full report, an executive summary and a version for children and young people can be downloaded from <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/byronreview/>

Overview

In 2007 Dr Tanya Byron was asked by the Prime Minister to carry out an assessment of the internet and video games and how they might affect children and young people. The final report was published in March 2008. In the introduction to her report, Dr Byron acknowledges that some of the more sensational publicity about the internet and video games has contributed to “a climate of anxiety surrounding new technology and created a fiercely polarised debate in which panic and fear often drown out evidence.”

She identifies the generational digital divide that exists between children and their parents as a risk factor and points out that whilst children may be technologically savvy, knowledge is not the same as wisdom and that children left to navigate a solo path through either the real world, or the virtual world, face many dangers.

As a clinical psychologist specialising in child and adolescent mental health, Dr Byron highlights a “risk-averse culture where we are inclined to keep our children ‘indoors’ despite their developmental needs to socialise and take risks.” However she also points out that “While children are confident with the technology, they are still developing critical evaluation skills and need our help to make wise decisions.”

The Byron review looked at the types of content and experiences that might affect children and young people, for example extreme violence in games, or bullying over the internet. It also looked at the research that has been carried out in this area and sought to identify how children and parents can ensure that children stay safe, whilst still reaping the benefits that technology can bring.

A “Call for Evidence” was issued to gather peoples views, and to collect all the

research that had already been done. In-depth “discussion groups” were held with parents and children. Meetings were held with over 100 organisations and individuals from children and parents organisations as well as with representatives of the internet and video games



industries. A comprehensive analysis of existing research was carried out and finally a large stakeholder conference was held to bring all the different ideas together.

The Byron report proposes a national strategy for child internet safety which involves better self-regulation and better provision of information and education for children and families. It also seeks to improve the systems that are already in place to help parents restrict children's access to games which are not suitable for their age.

The report tries to take a child-centred approach and states, "We need to take into account children's individual strengths and vulnerabilities, because the factors that can discriminate a 'beneficial' from a 'harmful' experience online and in video games will often be individual factors in the child." Clearly this is very difficult to do within a legislative or regulatory framework, although it better addresses the complexities of the situation.

Internet

In relation to the internet, the report concludes the following: from the evidence set out in Chapter 3 show that the potential risks online are closely correlated with potential benefits. Data is beginning to reveal risks to young people in terms of increased exposure to sexually inappropriate content, contributions to negative beliefs and attitudes, stranger danger, cyberbullying and access to inappropriate content from sites which may promote harmful behaviours. Moreover, there are issues relating to commercial content and contact with young people.

The report recommends that efforts should be focussed on reducing the availability of harmful and inappropriate material in the most popular parts of the internet, given that most of the material accessed is hosted on a relatively small number of very popular websites. It also calls for improvements to access controls, calling for action from industry (eg. setting up better parental controls), parents (eg. setting up parental control software properly) and children (eg. encouraging them to adopt safer online behaviours). Since we cannot guarantee that the internet can be made completely safe, the third internet-related recommendation is that we must build children's resilience to the material that they may be exposed to, so that they can navigate through it more safely.

Byron recommends the setting up of a UK Council on Child Internet Safety, that reports to the Prime Minister and is chaired by the Home Office and DCSF. Its role would be two-fold. Firstly better regulation, in the form of voluntary codes of practice wherever possible, for industry. Secondly, better information and education for all concerned. The Council should have access to an advisory group with expertise in technology and child development, should listen to the voices of children and parents and its work should be supported by a rolling programme of research, to inform delivery.

The report acknowledges that there are many "grey areas" when applying the criminal law, eg. to websites that promote suicide. It goes on to recommend that the Council should also investigate where the law around harmful and inappropriate material could be usefully clarified and explore appropriate enforcement responses.

The information and education strategy would incorporate two strands of activity:

- A properly funded public information and awareness campaign on child internet safety to change behaviour.
- Sustainable education and children's services initiatives to improve the skills of children and their parents around e-safety.



Schools

Section 23 of the Executive Summary looks specifically at schools and this is reproduced in its entirety below.

- *“That the Government ensures that e-safety best practice is well reflected in guidance and exemplar case studies across the curriculum as part of the support being provided to help schools to implement the new curriculum. I also recommend that the independent review of the primary curriculum being led by Sir Jim Rose should take full account of e-safety issues.*
- *That the TDA take steps to ensure that new teachers entering the profession are equipped with e-safety knowledge and skills. I recommend specific ways of achieving this, including revising the statutory ICT test, providing guidance for initial teacher training providers on how to assess trainee e-safety skills against the Professional Standards for Teachers and that TDA’s survey of new teachers should include elements on e-safety.*
- *That the Government takes this opportunity to encourage school leaders and teachers to focus on e-safety by identifying it as a national priority for continuous professional development (CPD) of teachers and the wider school workforce.*
- *That in all schools, action is taken at a whole-school level to ensure that e-safety is mainstreamed throughout the school’s teaching, learning and other practices.*

In particular I recommend that:

- *Government should encourage schools to use Becta’s self review framework assessment to drive continual improvement in schools’ use of ICT including with regard to e-safety.*
- *100% of schools should have Acceptable Use Policies that are regularly reviewed, monitored and agreed with parents and students. Guidance on this should be incorporated in Becta’s revised self review framework.*
- *That all schools and local children’s services use an accredited filtering service.”*

Section 24 (p9 of the report) looks at the delivery of e-safety skills through Extended Schools services and Section 25 makes recommendations for the role of Ofsted.

Gaming

Sections 35 to 37 give the recommendations about gaming, focussed on developing and enforcing effective age ratings and parental controls.

In conclusion

The Executive Summary ends with the following quote collected as part of the Children’s Call for Evidence.

“Kids don’t need protection we need guidance. If you protect us you are making us weaker we don’t go through all the trial and error necessary to learn what we need to survive on our own...don’t fight our battles for us just give us assistance when we need it.”